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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 000142

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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR MIDDLE EAST SPECIAL ENVOY GEORGE MITCHELL'S VISIT TO TURKEY

Classified By: Ambassador James Jeffrey for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (S) The Gaza crisis and IDF attacks on Palestinian civilians dominated the Turkish press for three weeks and will still be fresh in the minds of GOT officials as you arrive. PM Erdogan, incensed that Israel launched attacks on Gaza just days after PM Olmert had visited Ankara with no mention of Israeli thinking, described the strikes as a "black stain" on humanity. Pandering to overwhelming public opinion against perceived excessive use of force by IDF, opposition leaders and NGOs from across the political spectrum have called for reducing ties with Israel -- a line that the Erdogan administration has stated it will not cross. With the guns silenced, Erdogan and others are now trying to "right things" with a Davos meeting with Peres, open criticism of HAMAS, and other steps. The GOT will see your visit as an opportunity to establish ties with the new administration and as validation that Turkey has a role to play in the Middle East peace process.

KEY POINTS TO RAISE  
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12. (S) During your meetings with President Gul, PM Erdogan, FM Babacan, and Senior Foreign Policy Advisor Davutoglu, I suggest you focus on the following key points:

- TURKEY AND THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS: As an Annapolis partner, Turkey has played an important role in Middle East peace process and Lebanon. We look forward to continued partnership in the future. (para 5);

- TURKEY-ISRAEL RELATIONS: Turkey's relations with Israel benefit regional efforts to achieve peace. Inflammatory rhetoric or actions that could jeopardize Turkey's relationship with Israel will undercut Turkey's ability to play a role. (para 6);

- HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE TO GAZA: We appreciate Turkey's efforts to ease the suffering of the Palestinian people and to promote economic development. We also want to ensure access to humanitarian assistance in Gaza. (para 7);

- HAMAS: The USG continues to support Quartet conditions on HAMAS, namely that it recognize Israel, renounce violence, and adhere to past agreements. We appreciate Turkey's support for the Egyptian-brokered process and need Turkey's endorsement of these conditions. (para 8);

- ISRAEL/SYRIA TALKS: If Israel is in agreement, we hope that Turkey will once again return to facilitating communication between Tel Aviv and Damascus when the conditions are right. (para 9)

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13. (S) The Turks will very likely raise:

- DISPROPORTIONATE ISRAELI OPERATIONS IN GAZA: Civilian casualties Gaza resonated strongly with the Turkish people and many in the GOT. You should brief the Turks -- who joined the UNSC on January 1 -- on how we are working to resolve the humanitarian crisis and what we are prepared to do to maintain the peace. You will also want to underscore that the GOI in December responded to missile attacks from Gaza.

- HAMAS AS A LEGITIMATE POPULAR MOVEMENT: PM Erdogan and PM's Advisor Davutoglu may argue that HAMAS is a political force with popular legitimacy and, to achieve peace between the Israelis and Palestinians, the West will have to deal with HAMAS

- ISRAEL/SYRIA TALKS: The Bush administration expressed support for the Israel/Syria talks without committing to eventual U.S. participation. Although the talks have stalled due to the Gaza crisis, GOT officials may push you to make a stronger statement of support or a commitment for greater U.S. participation.

BACKGROUND  
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14. (C) Turkey is a NATO ally and European Union accession

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state that works with us on many key U.S. priorities -- Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, energy security, Pakistan, the Balkans, and Georgia -- in addition to the Middle East peace process. Under the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), the GOT has endeavored to improve relations with its broader neighborhood, particularly in the Middle East. This has led Turkey to proctor indirect talks between Israel/Syria and facilitate increased Afghan/Pakistan cooperation, as well as secure a non-permanent seat on the UNSC for 2009-2010. Erdogan's Oval Office meeting in November 2007, and our sharing of actionable intelligence on the presence of the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in the border area of northern Iraq that followed, marked a major positive turning point in US-Turkey relations. Turkey itself has experienced a tumultuous year of economic, social and political upheaval.

PM Erdogan is focused on the upcoming March 2009 local elections, which the AKP has turned into a referendum of sorts on its governance at the national level. Electoral politics has made Erdogan reluctant to pursue some EU accession-related reforms and more apt to lash out on populist issues, such as Gaza.

TURKEY AND THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS  
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15. (C) Citing the Israel/Palestine conflict as the root cause of regional instability, the GOT has endeavored to play a constructive role in the Middle East peace process. Turkey participated in and has subsequently supported the Annapolis Conference through participation in the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee and elsewhere. Turkey has sought greater leverage in Damascus and has taken a role as facilitator, passing information between the SARG and regional capitals. PM Erdogan and GOT officials played a notable role in striking the deal that led to consensus on Michel Sleiman assuming the presidency in Lebanon. During the Gaza crisis, PM Erdogan traveled to Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt in an attempt to help coalesce a consolidated Arab position. The problem is that Erdogan's pandering to public sentiment, his own Islamic orientation, and a general Turkish tendency to view "talking with everybody" as a substitute for real actions and decisions have painted Turkey seemingly into a corner: more tilting towards Syria and HAMAS than to Israel

and the moderate Arab states. Turks generally are uncomfortable, as they know the negative effect of this on their crucial relations with the U.S., and will want to better coordinate with us.

#### TURKEY-ISRAEL RELATIONS

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¶16. (C) Turkey and Israel have traditionally enjoyed strong ties. While the political relationship ebbs and flows depending on Israeli actions in the Palestinian territories, strong military and growing economic ties anchor the relationship in turbulent times. Although Turkey routinely votes the OIC position in the UNGA, the GOT has played a role in moderating anti-Israeli rhetoric in the organization's statements. Despite his inflammatory condemnation of the humanitarian situation, PM Erdogan has refused to concede to opposition demands that Turkey sever or downgrade its ties with Israel over violence in Gaza. Behind the scenes, the Turkish bureaucracy is diligently working to keep the lines of communication open between Tel Aviv and Ankara.

#### HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE TO GAZA

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¶17. (C) Turkey has a long-standing relationship with the Palestinian Authority. Since 1995, the GOT has donated over USD 30 million to Palestine, including development, health, education, security, and agricultural assistance. The Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) opened a branch in Ramallah in May 2005. Turkey has also worked to develop sustainable economic development in Palestinian territories through such programs as the Ankara Forum for Economic Cooperation Between Palestine, Israel, and Turkey; qualified industrial zone (QIZ) projects; and the construction of a Peace University on the Israel/West Bank border. During concurrent visits to Ankara, Palestinian Authority President Abbas and Israeli President Peres addressed the Turkish Grand National Assembly in November 2007, the first time an Israeli leader addressed a predominantly-Muslim parliament. The Turkish Red Crescent -- as well as numerous other Turkish groups -- have organized

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donation drives for humanitarian assistance in Gaza.

#### HAMAS

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¶18. (C) The GOT maintains open lines of communication with both Fatah and HAMAS. Following harsh international and domestic criticism for hosting HAMAS leader Khaled Meshal in February 2006, the GOT has kept its dealings with HAMAS out of the public eye, with Turkish leaders meeting HAMAS under the guise of party representatives instead of government officials. Most recently, Senior HAMAS spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri visited Istanbul, January 17. During the Gaza Crisis, Turkey advocated for HAMAS, inclusion in the negotiations, going as far as PM Erdogan publicly stating that Turkey would act as a voice for HAMAS at the UNSC. His Senior Foreign Policy Advisor Ahmet Davutoglu conducted shuttle diplomacy between Cairo and Damascus, passing information from Egyptian intelligence chief Omar Suleiman and HAMAS leadership.

#### ISRAEL/SYRIA TALKS

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¶19. (S) The GOT has hosted four rounds of indirect talks between Syria and Israel in Istanbul. The Turks have repeatedly told us that the talks cannot be finalized without an active U.S. role. Despite Turkey's urging to move forward, Tel Aviv and Damascus unofficially put the talks on hold when Kadima's coalition government fell apart in September 2008; following the Gaza crisis, the SARG and GOT officially suspended its efforts. Erdogan feels that both sides were within days of agreeing to a fifth round, this time direct talks, when the Gaza attack began.

Visit Ankara's Classified Web Site at  
<http://www.intelink.sgov.gov/wiki/Portal:Turkey>

Jeffrey